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ABSTRACT

The case study of James, a semiliterate 16-year-old delinquent, illustrates (1) the importance of learners' language strengths, (2) the importance of learners' perceptions about the nature of assigned tasks, and (3) the need to examine reading instruction as a possible contributor to delayed literacy. When James was asked to tape record a story, he provided a very imaginative, detailed story featuring dialogue, a well-developed plot, good characterization, and a brilliant climax. The story was transcribed and used as reading material for the student's next several tutoring sessions. When more reading material was needed, James was asked to tape another story. Compared to the first story, this second story was much shorter, had fewer idea units and less development, and was structurally less complex in the story grammar it generated. It was hypothesized that the second story was less demanding than the first because James realized that it would be transcribed and used for instruction. While the first study was seen as listener-based, designed to meet the needs and expectations of a listener, the second story was reader-based, reflecting James's limited prior experience with stories in print and his careful choices of just those grammatical features and lexical alternatives that he felt he could handle as a reader. James's perceptions of his past reading situations had affected his language use. (FL)

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The Reader-Based and Listener-Based Oral Text Processing of A Sixteen-Year-Old Beginning Reader

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In this paper we wish to present a "language story" (Harste, Burke, and Woodward, 1981), an account of an extended, evolving language situation that provides insight about written language use and instruction. This particular story illustrates 1) the importance of learners' language strengths, 2) the importance of learners' perceptions about the nature of assigned task, and 3) the need to examine reading instruction as a possible contributor to delayed literacy. The story involves two persons who participated directly in this language situation: James, a Black sixteen-

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year-old beginning reader; and Kay, James' tutor for a period of weeks and the senior author of this paper.

James was introduced to us through the probation office of the local police department. His probation officer described him as "illiterate." His teachers described him as a "trouble maker." We intend to describe him as a language user.

On the first day of tutoring, Kay took James for a ride through his downtown neighborhood and asked him to read anything that he could. When we encountered a "one-way" traffic sign with an arrow pointing to the right, James read "Turn right." When he encountered "Bryan Public Library" over the entrance to that building, he read "Bryan Library." He read "good rich" from the Goodyear logo on the front of the tire store. From these and other interactions with print, we became aware that James was indeed not illiterate when dealing with such environmental print.

James' probation officer had informed us that be "can't even write his name" and his former English teacher stated "he can't read a lick". Literacy, however, is context specific (Harste, 1979); while James may have been unable to deal successfully with certain kinds of print in some situations, he was at least somewhat successful as a reader in other instances. Even though James was not as successful a reader as we have come to expect a young man his age to be, it is important to recognize that his varying success in different situations is a characteristic that he shares with us, and with all readers.

James' Two Stories

After returning from their ride through the neighborhood, Kay turned on a tape recorder and asked James to tell a story. The following is a an excerpt from that story which he titled "The Basketball Kid"

This boy he's 15 years old. He always wanted to play basketball. So he went to a Boy's Club and didn't nobody recognize him. And so everybody come up and ask "What's his name?" He said his name was Wayne.

They told him their names. They asked did he want to play basketball?

He said he didn't play with chumps.

The story goes on to tell of the misadventures of Wayne, the protagonist of a very imaginative, detailed story featuring dialogue, a well-developed plot, good characterization, and a brilliant climax in which Wayne's basketball career, seriously threatened when he gets into trouble with the law, is dramatically salvaged by his coach.

The week after James told "The Basketball Kid', Kay arrived with a typed transcription of his story. This story was used as the reading material for the next several sessions: he illustrated the story, read along with the tape, and completed a modified cloze procedure where he wrote in predictable words and phrases that had been deleted. Kay's initial interview with him, in which he described his previous reading instruction, leads us to believe that during these sessions James read natural, connected discourse for the first time in his life.

Finally, when James was ready for new material, he taped another story. While Kay settled back with the tape recorder for another creative narrative, James began "Paperboy vs. Mailman":

"This boy...was throwing...newspaper...every...see... this boy throwed newspaper every day. And... the mail...

the mailman...was...always tries to beat him...to the box. the boy always rode a bike. The mailman had to drive a jeep. And the mailman had to stop for the stop...sign. And the boy...alway...rode his bike...around the curve... on the sidewalk. And.....so.....they...betted...he I mean...betted...he could beat him. To the mailman. And beat the mailman in. And the boy betted he couldn't. So...the next day they had...a race. See who was going to be there first. So...the mailman...saw him...coming... at the stop sign. And the mailman...ran...the stop sign ...and...the boy...was coming...around...the curve...and the mailman...look...off...see if there was any car was coming. And he drove faster...to the...house. And... he didn't see the...boy on the curve. Hit him.

Analysis of the Stories

Our immediate reaction was that this story was remarkably different from the first story. The total number of words in James' first story was 882; in the second story the total number of words was 162. The first story lasted nearly eight minutes while the second story lasted only two and a half, even though James spoke much more slowly (see Table 1) and deliberately ("thē", "ăround").

[Insert Table 1 here]

An examination of certain linguistic features within the two stories revealed other important differences.

Idea Units

One feature of oral language is that it is not produced in a continuous stream, but in a series of brief spurts. Halliday (1967) called

attention to these spurts of language some ago, giving them the name "information units". More recently Kroll (1977) and Chafe (1980) use the term "idea units", which we adopt here. Three obvious criteria aid in identifying idea units. The most important criterion is intonation: idea units end with a rise in pitch or a fall in pitch. A second factor is pausing: idea units are usually followed with at least a brief pause, and sometimes with an even more significant pause of a second or more. A third factor is that there is a tendency for idea units to consist of a single clause, which may often begin with the word "and" or, less often, with another conjunction such as "but" or "so".

"The Basketball Kid" consisted of 128 idea units whereas the second story, "Paperboy vs. Mailman", only totaled 60 (see Table 2). But even more interesting is the average word count per idea unit. In James' spontaneous conversational speech, the mean length of idea units is about 3.5 seconds, or about six words. The idea units in James' first story are similar to those produced in conversation, indicating a rather natural, spontaneous flow of oral story telling. However, in "Paperboy vs. Mailman" the mean length in seconds is over one second shorter, illustrating how choppy his phrasing was. Also, the mean length of idea units in words is markedly less: only 2.7 words per idea unit rather than his previous 6.9. Indeed, when a colleague heard this taped story she thought James was <u>reading</u> the story, in the halting, hesitating manner of some beginning readers.

(Insert Table 2 here)

<u>Centers of Interest</u>

A second feature of oral language that helped us to see differences in these two stories is what is called a center of interest (Chafe, 1980). A center of interest is the expression of an idea or topic that is too long

or complex to be fully developed in a single idea unit. Speakers therefore create centers of interest by linking related idea units together through the use of non-final intonation; usually this is a rise in pitch occurring at the ends of idea units. Centers of interest are somewhat analogous to paragraphs in written language in that they generally develop a single topic.

James developed a total of 36 centers of interest in his first story, and a total of 18 in his second (see Table 3). "Basketball Kid's" centers of interest were also developed fully: he didn't spare words in reporting details of the characters or plot. However, his second story averages only nine words per center of interest; even a brief inspection of the transcript will reveal that it contains only the bare threads of a story line, with no well-developed characters.

(Insert Table 3 Here)

Story grammars

A final look at the differences between James' two stories, "Basketball Kid" and "Paperboy vs. Mailman", involved an analysis of story grammar (Mandler & Johnson, 1977). In this analysis, each story was parsed into episodes according to when the protagonist's goal changed; the number and characteristic of episodes in the two stories were then compared.

This analysis revealed that "Basketball Kid" is structured in a very complex manner (see Figure 1). Two related narratives were actually generated, the first of which introduced the second. The first narrative contained five episodes and the second narrative contained eleven. The episodes are ending-embedded: the story is organized so that the Ending of each Episode is in fact all of the remaining Episodes. The result was a cohesive story with a relatively sophisticated, well-developed plot.

(Insert Figure 1 Here)

However, in the "Mailman" story, James produced a narrative that is-

not as richly and fully delineated (see Figure 2). The largest segment of the story was devoted to the establishment of the setting. The remainder of the story was a single episode with a few idea units devoted to the Beginning Event, the Attempt (effort to achieve a goal), the Outcome (the success or failure of the Attempt), and a very brief Ending. The result was a story with an impoverished plot structure and, in general, little to offer an audience.

(Insert Figure 2 Here)

Listener-Based and Reader-Based Stories

Why did James create such different stories? Why did he ignore his considerable strengths as a language-user and story-teller in his second story? We believe he did so because he was aware that his second story would be transposed into print and used for reading instruction.

All speakers must somehow orchestrate a complex array of linguistic and paralinguistic features in order to accomplish the purpose of their discourse. The precise nature of this orchestration is influenced heavily by the setting and situation in which it occurs. When James told his first story, he did not know that Kay intended to transcribe it and ask him to read it. But after several sessions of instruction built around the transcript of that story, there is little doubt that James realized what Kay's plans for his second story were.

Essentially, the first story James told was a listener-based story. Its linguistic and paralinguistic characteristics meet the needs and expectations of a listener; in short, it has the sound, feel, and texture of an oral-language story. As such, it is an oral-language counterpart of reader-based stories (Flower, 1979) in written language.

His second story, however, is in large measure the product of James' realization that it would be transcribed and used for instruction. As such, it represents his attempt to orchestrate language according to the demands of a different situation. A situation which called for a predominance of

the features of written stories, as he had experienced them, and which would soon demand that he read this story. It is thus a reader-based story, reflecting James' limited prior experience with stories in print and his careful choices of just those grammatical features and lexical alternatives that he felt he could handle as a reader.

Though "Paperboy vs. Mailman" may be a rudimentary first attempt at producing a written-language story, it must be recognized that this story demonstrates James' awareness of and sensitivity to the differential characteristics of speech and print. And though he had previously written no more than his name on school papers and legal forms, he has shown us an understanding of the notion of audience in written language as well as in oral language, and of the fact that the expectations of readers are different from those of listeners.

Discussion and Implications

While we are delighted at the sophistication that James shows in these two stories, we must also be prepared to acknowledge that the two stories are quite different in quality. We must face the reality that "Mailman vs. Paperboy" is most probably the unfortunate result of James' written language instruction, which focused his attention on accurate performance in reading and writing and away from meaning.

In interviews with Kay prior to the taping of his first story, James revealed a preoccupation with exactness in reading and with knowing words as crucial to the success of a reading event. He was most reluctant to write during tutoring sessions out of fear that what he produced would be wrong. In contrast to so many young children who freely use functional invented spelling prior to instruction, James would almost rather avoid the whole process than risk being wrong. To him, good reading and good writing both seem to be a matter of being "right", and being right the first time.

Written language instruction that leads learners to develop such notions also tends to offer little in the way of exciting and well-developed stories to be read, and equally little in the way of opportunities for composing real, rhetorically-based stories. In fact, "Mailman vs. Paperboy" resembles in some important ways the pseudostories that appear in too many basals for the purpose of practicing recently-taught word attack skills in a context that can best be described as impoverished.

As we have indicated, "Mailman vs. Paperboy" is structurally simple and underdeveloped. There is no dialogue in this story, and we learn little about its characters. They have no names, and no real impact upon the listener. We do not know whether the paperboy was killed or injured, or what sort of effect being hit by the jeep may have had upon him. We do not know if the mailman summoned help, or if he saved the boy's life through the heroic application of first aid, or if he tried to comfort the boy somehow until help arrived, or if he callously left the scene of the accident. While we can easily adopt an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1978) toward "The Basketball Kid" and share in the protagonist's frustrations and triumphs, it is practically impossible to adopt such a stance toward "Mailman vs. Paperboy"; there is nothing in the story to generate feelings within a listener because there is no real human experience to live through.

Given the characteristics of "Mailman vs. Paperboy", it may be more appropriate to call it a reading-instruction-based story. To the extent that stories of this sort characterized James' reading instruction, it is not too difficult to imagine that they may have rendered him somewhat less than eager to be a reader. As we indicated earlier, James at age 16 was literate only in a narrow range of print settings. Although there is no doubt that many factors are involved in the development of young adults who read no better than James, we would contend that research should seriously

investigate reading instruction as a contributing factor.

There is one other important cue that researchers can take from James, which lies in the fact that his second story was neither intended nor predicted to be the kind of story it was. In fact, the reverse was true; we both intended for him to produce another story of the quality of "The Basketball Kid", and would have predicted that he would do so. But when James sat down to tell "Mailman vs. Paperboy", the situation as he perceived it was different from the one in which he told "The Basketball Kid"; Kay had clearly become a teacher, and their interaction was now for the purpose of instruction in reading. And it is crucial to note that although the instruction that Kay provided was rooted in real language and focused upon meaning, James' previous experience with reading instruction was such that this difference was not important to him or perhaps not even noted by him. The total situation as he perceived it seemed to call for a story like "Mailman".

As researchers, we must not expect that subjects' performance is limited or affected only by some index of their ability to perform an assigned context-free task. Nor is it enough to be cognizant of the nature of the situation from our own perspective; indeed, that is what led us to our faulty prediction about the kind of story James would tell the second time around. We must instead be prepared to gain an awareness of the situation as the subject perceives it. Only then can we begin to develop a better understanding of the sociopsycholinguistic process that reading is.

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Table 1

Length of Stories in Words and Seconds

	"The Basketball Kid"	"Mailman vs. Paperboy"
Total words	883	162
Total seconds	475	151

Table 2

Length of Idea Units in Words and Seconds

	"The Basketball Kid"	"Mailman vs. Paperboy"
Idea Units	128.0	60.0
$\bar{X}$ no. words per idea unit	6.9	2.7
$\bar{X}$ no. seconds per idea unit	3.7	1.1

Table 3

Length of Centers of Interest in Words and Seconds

	"The Basketball Kid"	"Mailman vs. Paperboy"
Centers of interest	36.0	18.0
$\bar{X}$ no. words per center of interest	24.5	9.9
$\bar{X}$ no. idea units per center of interest	3.6	3.3

Figure 1

Idea Units in Story Grammar Categories in "The Basketball Kid"

Narrartive 1	Idea Unit No.
Setting:	1-2
Episode 1	
Beginning:	Ø
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	3
Attempt:	4
Outcome:	5
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 2	
Beginning:	6
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	7
Outcome:	8
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 3	
Beginning:	9
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	10
Outcome:	11
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 4	
Beginning:	12-16
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	17-19
Attempt:	20-22
Outcome:	23-36
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 5	
Beginning:	37-38
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	39
Outcome:	40-44
Ending:	45

Narrative 2	Idea Unit No.
Setting:	46-48
Episode 1	
Beginning:	49
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	50
Attempt:	Ø
Outcome:	51
Attempt:	52
Outcome:	53-56
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 2	
Beginning:	57
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	58-59
Outcome:	60
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 3	
Beginning:	61
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	62-64
Attempt:	65-68
Outcome:	69-70
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 4	
Beginning:	71-72
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	73
Outcome:	74
Attempt:	75
Outcome:	76-77
Attempt:	78
Outcome:	79
Attempt:	80
Outcome:	81-85
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 5	
Beginning:	86-87
Simple Reaction:	Ø
Goal:	88a
Attempt:	88b
Outcome:	89a
Outcome:	89b
Ending:	All that follows

	Idea Unit No.
Episode 6	
Beginning:	90-97
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	98-99
Outcome:	100-102
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 7	
Beginning:	103
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	104
Outcome:	105-106
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 8	
Beginning:	107-108
Simple Reaction:	109
Goal:	110
Attempt:	111
Outcome:	112-113a
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 9	
Beginning:	113b
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	114
Outcome:	115-116
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 10	
Beginning:	117
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	118-119
Outcome:	120-121
Ending:	All that follows
Episode 11	
Beginning:	122-125
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	126
Outcome:	127
Ending:	128-130

Figure 2

Idea Units in Story Grammar Categories in "Mailman vs. Paperboy"

Setting:	1-27
Episode	
Beginning:	28-35
Complex Reaction:	Ø
Attempt:	36-39
Outcome:	40-59
Ending:	60